

Bob Dylan's Dream: Music and Culture in the Sixties

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Melany Wessels

Thesis Advisor

Thalia Mulvihill

*Thalia M. Mulvihill, Ph.D.*

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

December 1997

Graduation date: December 1997

### Purpose of Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to unite the music of Bob Dylan with the cultural and political events of the early 1960s. Important historical events, cultural trends, and political movements as well as events in the life of Bob Dylan are discussed to set the background for interpretations of three of his songs from the 1965 album, *Bringing It All Back Home*. The songs included are "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Maggie's Farm" and "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)." By interpreting these songs, it will become evident that music and culture were intertwined during the sixties.

.w47

"i know no answers an' no truth  
for absolutely no soul alive  
i will listen t' no one  
who tells me morals  
there are no morals  
an' i dream alot"

(Bob Dylan, 1964, Internet 1)

The decade of the sixties was an amazing time in the history of the United States. Lives were constantly changing, new doors were opening, new ideals were being born, and a new way of life was springing up from the ways of the past. Bob Dylan (b. 1941) made a great impact on these times through his music. It is widely debated as to whether Dylan actually altered the course of history by writing controversial lyrics to incite the masses or whether he simply was changing along with his generation and creating music that followed his changes and echoed the feelings of the youth. Some feel that "his particular talent was the ability to react creatively to both events and the general climate of opinion (Forland 1992)." Others believe that he could turn the political tide by offering his opinion through song (Rodnitzky 1976). However, most can agree that he set a new standard for pop music by placing more emphasis on insightful lyrics than ever before and blending them with the sounds of electric instruments.

On influencing the times, Dylan himself has claimed the he "had never tried to change anything; doubted that he ever changed anything; hoped he had not changed anything; and in any event just plain did not care (Rodnitzky 1976)." This stance only served to enhance his rock star mystique since whether or not he cared to acknowledge it, he had permanently altered the course of American popular music. Rock and roll became a force to be reckoned with. In many ways, Dylan made it possible "that rock and roll could (and *should*) make a difference: that it was eloquent and inspiring and principled enough to change the world--maybe even save it (Peters 1990)." Nearly every artist coming after

Dylan was influenced by his lyrics and musical style and a new generation of music emerged.

As was pointed out in The Dylan Companion, "Anyone who didn't live through the sixties simply cannot realize how important his albums seemed then; they defined a community (Thomson 1990)." Following the release of his most well-known albums, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963) and *The Times They Are A-Changing* (1964), Dylan was labeled the "voice of his generation." His songs "Blowin' in the Wind," "Masters of War," "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," and "The Times They Are A-Changing" established him as the crowned prince of folk protest music. These songs and their anti-war and anti-authority messages identified him with the younger generation. This generation felt there was something wrong with the world and was looking for someone to show them the answers. They believed Dylan was that man. He became a musical prophet for those who were searching for the truth in a confusing era.

Dylan's music has become inextricably bound to the era of the sixties. He has amassed an immense body of work throughout the years and continues to be prolific to this day, yet his earliest and best known work so completely captured a sense of the times that it cannot be removed from its historical background. It has been said that, "while the political dimension of Dylan's career should be self-evident, not enough attention has been devoted to 'synthesizing' Dylan's work with the turbulent history of the sixties (Thomson 1990)."

This synthesis of the music and the times is what this thesis is seeking to accomplish. It is no longer necessary to decide if Dylan changed history or was changed by it himself; it is more important to unite these forces in order to understand the influence Dylan's music had during that time. I will set the historical and cultural context for the early 1960s and explore Dylan's personal experience which served as a backdrop for Dylan's earliest works. I will interpret the songs, "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Maggie's Farm" and "It's All right, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" from his 1965 album, *Bringing it All Back Home*.

My purpose is to synthesize Dylan's music with the historical and cultural events and his own experiences leading up to the time of the writing of this album.

The sixties were a time of great cultural and social transformation. Worlds were opening up as new ideas, lifestyles and trends captured national attention. Anything seemed possible in this prosperous era. There were major developments in science and technology leading up to the lunar landing in 1969. Color television brought a unique dimension to our lives. It was the era of mass communication, where Americans could watch global events unfolding in the comfort of their living rooms. It was a time when changes in individual morality began; sex was out in the open and people adopted new ways of thinking.

The decade of the sixties began auspiciously with the inauguration of an idealistic young president. John F. Kennedy symbolized a "New Frontier" for America. He brought with him the promise of an exciting future; to put ways of the past behind them and blaze a trail toward that future.

Despite this advantageous position, Kennedy was left to deal with some difficult issues from the previous presidency. In 1961, the Cold War with Russia was still raging. During his first year in office, Kennedy allowed for a military build-up of weapons in order to retain the United States' positions as the most powerful nation in the world. Due to this accumulation of arms, which included long-range bombers, submarines and land-based missiles, the country lived in constant fear of nuclear war. "The matter of survival under atomic threat became a community dread not unlike the fear of smallpox in the Old West (Koerselman 1987)."

The threat of nuclear war became very real in the fall of 1962. In March of that year, Cuba, a small island off the coast of Florida, had formed an alliance with Russia. Cuba's dictator, Fidel Castro, feared that the United States would invade the country and overthrow him. To protect himself, Castro agreed to ally his country with Russia. Soon after this alliance was formed, the Russians began installing missiles on the island and started construction of medium-range

missile bases. These kind of weapons could have easily obliterated much of the United States in the event of a nuclear war. Also, the action of installing the weapons seriously undermined the power of the United States.

When the story broke on October 22, 1962, Kennedy initiated a quarantine on Cuban ports to ensure that the missiles could no longer get through to Cuba. He demanded that Khrushchev dismantle the existing missile sites and cease further construction. In response, Khrushchev continued to send cargo ships with supplies that were guarded by submarines toward Cuba. Kennedy held firm to his original position although the specter of nuclear war was looming in the distance.

The standoff continued until it seemed as if nuclear destruction was eminent. The crisis was ultimately relieved when Khrushchev issued statements to the president calling for the promise of the U. S. not to invade Cuba in exchange for Russia removing the missile sites. When the president agreed to these terms, the crisis was narrowly averted as the Russian ships turned and headed for home (Koerselman 1987).

Because of the crisis, the fear of nuclear annihilation was weighing heavily on the minds of the American public. People were now being taught how to protect themselves in the event of an actual nuclear war. Public service announcements reinforced safety tips and merchants sold "home survival kits," while children participated in bomb drills during school. Fallout shelters were springing up across the country and being kept ready for use as a final refuge if World War III began. The concern over survival under atomic attack overwhelmed American life. "At cocktail parties and P.T.A. meetings and family dinners, on busses and commuter trains and around office water coolers, talk turns to shelters (Koerselman 1987)." It is no wonder that a generation raised on war and fear would eventually grow up to vehemently denounce these things.

Bob Dylan was no different from others of his generation. He felt the same fears rising throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis as those around him. The

only difference was that he was able to put his fears into writing and sang about them with his music. Early in his career, Dylan spoke out about nuclear war in songs such as "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall." He spoke of the "pellets of poison" that were flooding the waters of the nation. He asked, "How many times must the cannonballs fly before they're forever banned?" in "Blowin' in the Wind." He described the desolation in the aftermath of a nuclear war in the satirical, "Talkin' World War III Blues."

Kennedy's politics centered around his idea of a "New Frontier." Following the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy called for an end to the arms race. He wanted to form alliances with Europe and Third World countries in order to secure foreign trade expansion. He wanted to work with Soviet-American relations to create a pathway toward global peace. Kennedy supported the space program and helped America to see that anything, even walking on the moon, was possible.

The civil rights movement was important to Kennedy. He sought to ensure equal opportunity in the workplace and to end discrimination on interstate travel. He named several blacks to federal offices. In addition, he was responsible for ordering the troops that helped James Meredith to integrate the University of Mississippi. He believed that justice must be given to all in order to achieve the free society he envisioned. He called for decisive action on racial issues by saying that, "It cannot be met by representative police actions. It cannot be left to increased demonstrations in the streets. It cannot be quieted by token moves or talk. It is time to act! (Koerselman 1987)"

Kennedy embodied a spirit of youth. He signaled a changing of the guard where the fate of the nation was in the hands of the young rather than the older generation. His "Camelot" presidency brought style and grace to our country and showed us a better way of life. He showed us that the youth of America had a voice in politics and gave respect to the younger generation. In many ways, Kennedy made it possible for young artists like Dylan to be heard. He showed

us that it was time for a change, however, he failed to live long enough to see his plans through.

On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated while riding in a motorcade through the streets of Dallas, Texas. Kennedy's life was ended before he could see his "New Frontier" become a reality. The shocked nation grieved for the loss of their beloved president and somehow knew that things would never be quite the same again.

That fateful day was an important one in the lives of many Americans. This is true also for Bob Dylan. With his manager, Albert Grossman, and his girlfriend, Suze Rotolo, he watched the events of the Kennedy assassination unfolding on television. Dylan was perhaps more affected by the assassination than most. With his outspoken position as a protest singer, he became worried about his own safety. Dylan's friend, Eric Anderson, said of him at that time, "He might have even had fears of assassination himself, being the center of attention and saying the kind of things he was saying. Kennedy's death brought home that there were a lot of maniacs out there in this country...he was probably scared of getting knocked off himself (Scaduto 1971)." It scared Dylan to be a public figure and to sing his protest music. This event may have caused Dylan to leave formal politics behind and to focus his attention on discussing society at large.

Lyndon Johnson became president following the assassination of Kennedy. He sought to revive the principles of Roosevelt's "New Deal" policy. He wanted "consensus and reconciliation" among the American people. This echoed the mood of the times. The public was still reeling from the loss of their president and need something to bring them back together. Johnson characterized his vision of the future and its respective legislative programs as the "Great Society." In this vision, he saw America as striving to better itself to become an example for all other nations to follow. It built on Kennedy's reform ideals of the "New Frontier" (Koerselman 1987) and added capitalistic expansion



policies intended to benefit all Americans. He founded the Head Start program and the Job Corp to aid the underprivileged. However, he was most effective with the business expansion aspect of his policy. Capitalism displayed its strength as corporations merged and went multinational.

It was during Johnson's presidency that the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 was passed. He was instrumental in seeing that it was prohibited to use literary tests in order to qualify to vote. This bill also made it unlawful for discrimination in public facilities, called for desegregation and initiated the equal employment opportunity policy.

More importantly, Johnson had to deal with the issue of Vietnam. When Johnson took office, the U. S. was financially supporting the South Vietnamese to protect their government from the communist reign of Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese formed the National Liberation Front, or the Viet Cong, and terrorized the south, led by Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem was assassinated in November of 1963 through a military coup. At this time, the American government was content to take a back seat on Vietnamese issues, claiming that it was "their war" and they should not get involved at this stage.

In the year after Johnson took office, the situation in Vietnam continued to deteriorate. As the situation became more volatile, Johnson called for stranger military action. He claimed that the Viet Cong were "challenging democracy and world order (Koerselman 1987)." He felt it was the duty of the U. S. to protect the independence of the South Vietnamese. He didn't want to lose this battle in the war against Communism.

In August of 1964, Johnson had stationed patrol boats in the Gulf of Tonkin to protect the South Vietnamese troops who were stationed there. The *Maddox* and the *C. Turner Joy* were soon attacked by North Vietnamese gunboats. In retaliation, Johnson ordered air strikes against North Vietnamese military targets. This confrontation led to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in which the U.S.

was determined to take any necessary steps to stop North Vietnamese aggression.

Throughout the remainder of the year, attacks from the North Vietnamese grew more frequent. As a result, Johnson called for the escalation of the war against the Viet Cong. On March 2, 1965, Operation Rolling Thunder put into action a series of bomb attacks, once again aimed at North Vietnamese military targets. This escalation resulted in sending thousands of American soldiers to South Vietnam and increased spending to support the troops. By the end of 1965, 200,000 men were stationed in Vietnam and financial support swelled to over \$100 billion (Layman 1995). This build-up intended to bring about negotiations with the North Vietnamese.

As the war escalated and the casualty rate rose, the public withdrew their initial support for the president's actions. There was a growing discontent in the public perception of their authority figures. This was a time that historian R. R. Palmer characterized as one "in which confidence in the justice or reasonableness of existing authority is undermined, where old loyalties fade, obligations are felt as impositions, law seems arbitrary, government is sensed as distant, and respect for superiors is felt as a form of humiliation (Koerselman 1987)." Spurred on by these emotions, people began to demonstrate against the war with draft card burnings, marches and sit-ins.

The nation experienced a feeling of alienation; they were divided by this war, leaving them with no sense of community. The younger generation questioned the values held by the older generation. They saw America's growing materialism as meaningless and saw the war in Vietnam as an effort by the government to protect its capitalistic progress at the expense of the young men sent to die in a senseless war. They were shocked by the hypocrisy displayed by their authority figures.

Bob Dylan expressed these views of the times through his music. He was affected by the growing concerns over the war in Vietnam. Alienation,

devaluation of old morals and the hypocrisy of those in power positions are major threads that run through his best work. In this respect, Dylan reflected the mood of the times. Therefore, it was no surprise that "Dylan went electric at almost the very moment that Lyndon Johnson began bombing North Vietnam and escalating the war in the south. The increasing violence and intensity of Dylan's work mirrored the expanding violence in the country (Dickstein 1977)." His work began to take on society as a whole. In his album, *Bringing it All Back Home*, Dylan took a look at the absurdity of American life and thoroughly denounced nearly every convention of society at that time.

This wave of emotion carried over to the university campuses in the form of protest. The students were frightened by the future prospects which the nation was leaving for them. Young men were being sent to fight in a war they could not condone. They were concerned that their individualism was being sacrificed and that they would become part of the "capitalist machine." Increasingly, students rejected "suburban standards and moral values" and grew disenchanted with the supposed "American Dream."

The first university protest took place on the campus of the University of Berkeley. The university had banned students from using an area of school property where they often gathered to promote political issues. The Berkeley Free Speech Movement paved the way for college protest throughout the remainder of the sixties. They conducted sit-ins and marches to stand up for their rights. They conveyed a strong distrust of the "Establishment" and were the first to coin the phrase, "Don't trust anyone over thirty."

Many of the college students were influenced by the music of Bob Dylan. Dylan was becoming the voice of this generation, sounding the battle charge to change the world. "In an age of youthful rebellion, if Dylan did not actually say what the young thought, he at least articulated views that many wished they held. In any event, Dylan's evolving world view during the 1960s tells us much about the proverbial generation gap, while explaining why Dylan became a

powerful cultural hero (Rodnitzky 1976)." Whether or not Dylan cared to admit it, he was echoing the sentiments of the young throughout the nation. One student said, "We're concerned with things like the threat of nuclear war, the civil rights movement, and the spreading blight of dishonesty, conformity and hypocrisy in the U. S. and Bob Dylan is the only American writer dealing with these subjects in a way that makes any sense to us (Koerselman 1987)."

He was, perhaps, even more influential among the radical student movements. The New Left protested the emptiness of modern life and society's failure to live up to their ideals of equality and freedom. They held the "Establishment" responsible for the failures of their day. Elite liberals had sacrificed justice, truth and idealism for power and money. The New Left called for a revolution to change the way America was being run. It was important for many of the New Left to educate the public and increase their social and political awareness. They were to display their affiliation with their cause by complete dissent of establishment ideals and by setting a good moral example. They wanted to create a "new political and social structure in which individual uniqueness could be accommodated and mass collectivization avoided (Cantor 1969)."

The most outspoken proponents of this way of thinking were the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). They felt closely akin to what they thought were Dylan's politics and took him as their unofficial spokesman. As Todd Gitlin, a one-time leader of SDS, would later write, "Whether he liked it or not, Dylan *sang for us*... We followed his career as if he were singing our song (Forland 1992)."

SDS was founded by Tom Hayden in 1962 on the college campus of the University of Michigan. He wrote the Port Huron Statement which would later serve to represent the ideals or mission statement of the group. Hayden called for a participatory democracy in which both political parties would foster individual self-respect and a feeling of connection. He wanted to overhaul the system and make it work for the people. The group was active in the civil

rights movement by taking part in voter registration drives in 1964. They took on the Vietnam War in May of 1965, by creating a full week of awareness-raising events including classes, marches, demonstrations, and spreading leaflets (Koerselman 1987). As the decade rolled on, the politics of SDS grew more radical.

Another important issue in the sixties was the Civil Rights Movement. The movement itself began in 1909 when the National Negro Committee was founded in order to promote racial equality in the United States. This group later became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The movement gained momentum in the fifties following the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case of 1952. This case was centered around a black family that wanted to send their daughter to an all-white school. They challenged the "separate, but equal" provision for education under the law by stating that segregation was not equal in any way. In 1954, a decision was made in favor of the family and called for the integration of all schools. This set the tone and the direction for the civil rights movement in the sixties.

In 1955, another step was made in the movement. This was the year in which Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. At this time, buses were segregated and blacks were expected to give their seats to white passengers when the white section was full. Parks' refusal to do so sparked a rash of bus boycotts initiated by a young minister, Martin Luther King, Jr. King was soon to become one of the most respected and well-known leaders of the movement in the sixties.

King organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the early part of the decade to mobilize the masses for the causes of the movement. He was responsible for implementing the precedent-setting "patient and dignified" protest style that characterized the civil rights movement. The first example of this kind of protest took place on February 1, 1960 at the Agricultural and Technical College at Greensboro, North Carolina. Four black

students entered a Woolworth's store and sat down at the all-white lunch counter. While enduring the insults of the white patrons, the students simply sat there, silently studying their school books (Cantor 1969).

In rapid succession, organizations such as the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), were founded and put into action. On March 13, 1961 CORE sponsored the first of many "Freedom Rides." These rides were integrated bus trips through the southern states and whose purpose was to challenge discrimination in interstate bus terminals. The rides gained support from many northern white liberals due to the exposure the riders received on television, radio and through the press. The riders faced increasingly severe opposition as they traveled further south. Violence frequently broke out until finally, the bus itself was bombed when it reached Alabama.

In addition to these freedom rides, voter registration drives were sponsored in 1961 to encourage the black population to vote and make their voices heard. Groups including SNCC, CORE, SCLC, and the NAACP joined together to travel throughout the south to set up the voter registration drives. In 1963, the Freedom Registration Drive was held and registered black voters without the limiting factors such as poll taxes and literacy tests. As a result, 83,000 people participated, illustrating the enormous strength that the black population would have if they united to vote in the next election.

In July of 1963, Dylan was involved in civil rights activities. He took part in a voter registration drive in Greenwood, Mississippi sponsored by SNCC. At the drive, Dylan performed several songs including, "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Only a Pawn in Their Game." Peter Yarrow, of Peter, Paul and Mary fame, said, "The tradition of folk music was always political. Folk music carried with it an idealism. So, it was eminently natural that if you sang that music you would actually be a part of any movement or effort that would seek to achieve that

vision. Folk music became a liturgy of the consciousness of change in America (Rock and Roll 1996)."

The aftermath of the drive had adverse reactions on Dylan. Many of the activists felt he had a responsibility to the movement because of his protest songs. They wanted him to participate in more activities and make appearances at events. Everyone wanted something from him, and ultimately drove him away. "He had to protect his privacy, and from that day on he swore off political organizations (Spitz 1989)." In a 1966 interview with Playboy Magazine (found on an Internet website), Dylan was asked whether he had lost interest in protest and his involvement with SNCC. In response, he said, "As far as SNCC is concerned, I knew some of the people in it, but I only knew of them as people, not as any part of something bigger or better than themselves. . . I haven't lost interest in protest since then. I just didn't have any interest in protest to begin with...You can't lose what you've never had (Internet 2)."

Throughout the first half of the decade, protests in the form of sit-ins, pray-ins, picketing, and boycotts, continued to gain popularity and drew support from greater numbers of people. The movement also suffered its share of setbacks. In June of 1963, the movement lost one of its most outspoken leaders. Medgar Evers was shot in the back at the hand of a white man. His killer, Byron de la Beckwith, was not indicted for his crime although he admitted his guilt. In September of the same year, four young girls were killed when their church was bombed in Birmingham, Alabama. In addition, three civil rights workers were killed in Mississippi at a "Freedom Summer" voter registration drive on June 21, 1964 (Layman 1995).

The March on Washington on August 28, 1963, was the high point of the civil rights movement. The purpose of the march, organized by King, was to pressure Congress to pass the Civil Rights Bill. The spirit of cooperation filled the city as 200,000 people converged around the Lincoln Memorial (Cantor 1969). It was a day of peace and an historical moment in history. King delivered his

famous "I Have a Dream" speech and singers from all walks of life lifted their voices for the cause. Among the participants were Peter, Paul and Mary, Joan Baez, the Freedom Singers, and Bob Dylan.

Dylan's participation in this important historical and cultural event illustrates his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. He often wrote his songs about issues concerning the treatment of the black population and pointed his finger at those who were responsible for their mistreatment. In "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," Dylan tells us the true story of a black servant who was killed by her white master simply because he was "feelin' that way without warning." The real tragedy in this event is that the murderer was given only a six month sentence for his crime. "Oxford Town" chronicles the efforts of James Meredith who integrated the University of Mississippi. "Only a Pawn in Their Game" was a song about the slain civil rights leader, Medgar Evers, which suggested the killer was taught to hate blacks and was only acting according to 'their' (i.e.: white politicians) plans.

The March on Washington marked the end of a phase in the civil rights movement. By 1964, people were beginning to grow restless with the slow progress of the movement and demanded "Freedom Now." The Civil Rights Bill had been passed by Congress. The bill was intended to protect blacks from discrimination in the workplace and in education, however, the gap between the letter of the law and reality was wide and seemed to be expanding. Blacks looked for alternate ways of achieving their goals other than the road of "passive resistance." They were no longer content to be passive and took matters into their own hands.

One of the results of this sentiment was the insurgence of the Black Muslim Movement. The religion, loosely based on Islamic traditions, was founded by Elijah Muhammad in the early 1950s. The movement picked up steam and gained national attention when a militant preacher named Malcolm X joined Muhammad in his endeavors. The Black Muslims concentrated on



rejecting European customs, culture and religion and identified themselves more closely with their African heritage. One of the dominating beliefs the Muslims held was that the white man was the devil and would pay for his evil deeds on a racial judgment day. They felt they had to protect themselves from the white man and would defend themselves by using "any means necessary," including violence. They also sought to create their own independent black nation where they would be able to live without the interference of the white man.

This trend towards violence continued to build until it erupted on July 18, 1964 in New York City in the form of a riot. The riot was encouraged by the shooting of a black teen a few days earlier by a white police officer. The citizens rallied against the police station and called for a civilian review board for the officers in question. Members of CORE organized a sit-in in a Harlem police station and refused to be moved until their demands were met. Soon, riots broke out across the city. The rioting lasted four days and included rampant looting and destruction, resulting in the death of one person and injuring over one hundred.

This wave of violence made its way to the west coast by August 11 of 1965. The disturbing scenes from the New York City riots, still fresh in the public's mind, were revisited in Watts, California as rioting broke out once again. The riots were in response to police brutality on the part of white officers in their dealings with the black population (Layman 1995).

The times had certainly changed in the early 1960s. The sense of confidence which characterized the first years of the decade had shifted to doubt and distrust. The emphasis was placed within the individual. A sense of openmindedness and tolerance to choose your own road surfaced and allowed for discussion of ideas and provided new opportunity to experiment with different lifestyles. Sex was out in the open and was accepted on a more widespread basis. Religion contradicted the liberal ideals of the time and was deemed to be unimportant and inconsequential in the lives of many Americans.

In effect, the younger generation shrugged off the values of the past, took up their new-found freedom and carved out their place in history.

Dylan's life was rapidly changing during the first half of the decade. In 1961, he left his home in Hibbing, Minnesota to travel to New York City where he visited the bedside of his ailing idol, Woody Guthrie (Scaduto 1971). Guthrie, known as the "Dust Bowl Poet," had written protest music in the form of union songs to support the labor movement. He greatly influenced Dylan in his way of thinking, dressing, speaking, and most importantly, in his music. Dylan was soon becoming an attraction at the Greenwich Village coffee houses where a folk music scene was blossoming. He quickly began to write his own material and secured a record deal. His first release, a collection of folk songs entitled *Bob Dylan*, sold poorly in 1962.

Dylan fared better with the release of his second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, which was released on May 23, 1963. This album contained folk classics penned by Dylan such as "Blowin' in the Wind," "Masters of War," and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall." These songs established him as the new voice of folk music (Spitz 1989). He was embracing the politics of the Movement and expressed his disapproval of society through these songs. His music was completely different from what was being played on the pop music radio stations. It was raw, unfinished music in comparison to the slick ballads which were being produced on Tin Pan Alley. Dylan commented on his style of music and its reaction by saying, "...people have to be ready. They have to see me once already. People often say the first time they hear me, this isn't folk music. My songs aren't easy to listen to (Internet 3)."

The month of July, 1963 included an appearance at the Newport Folk Festival. He had performed at the festival prior to this occasion, yet this time, he appeared not as the unknown apprentice, but as the reigning king of folk music. He had begun to perfect his star attitude at this time. He was famous in New York City and had fans who thought he was speaking for them; to them he was a

musical prophet who had a certain mystical insight which they lacked. People had begun to emulate his style of dress and the way he spoke. He had arrived; yet only in New York. To reach a larger audience, he knew he needed exposure on a much larger scale.

Joan Baez invited Dylan to join her on a tour of college campuses that spring. This was precisely the kind of publicity Dylan needed. Bob Dylan was introduced to the world by Baez, a successful folk singer in her own right. They had met the previous May at the Monterey Folk Festival in California. She was impressed by his talent and was in awe of him because Dylan possessed the gift to write what she had longed to say, but could not find the words. Within a few short months, Baez and Dylan began a relationship. This relationship was complicated due to the fact that Dylan was already in a relationship with long-time girlfriend, Suze Rotolo. Baez had been singing his songs at her concerts and wanted to introduce her audience to the author himself. He was brought on stage in the middle of her two sets as an unannounced guest (Spitz 1989). After winning over new audiences night after night with his performances, Dylan had become famous. By October of that year, Dylan had his own concert tour and began filling venues including Carnegie Hall with his own fans.

In the weeks following the Kennedy assassination, Dylan received the Tom Paine Award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee for his efforts in furthering the civil rights movement. His fears surfaced as he delivered a disastrous speech after receiving his award. He began his speech by telling all of the old people in the audience that they should retire and leave the activism to the younger generation. From this he moved on to a spirited "some-of-my-best-friends-are-black" rap which began to make his audience uneasy. The final blow was his comment that he saw some of himself in the actions of Lee Harvey Oswald, the person responsible for murdering the president only a few weeks earlier. According to his later explanations, Dylan was describing the status of the violent times, yet the pain of the assassination was too fresh in their minds

and the reaction to his words was hostile (Internet 1). He had thoroughly put down his hosts and was unable to express his views that night. That night served as the end to his speaking publicly about political issues for the rest of his career (Scaduto 1971).

January 13, 1964 saw the release of *The Times They Are A-Changing*. This was Dylan's first album of entirely original material including such classics as the title track and "Only a Pawn in Their Game." It was a strong piece of protest work with songs against racism ("The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll"), war ("With God on Our Side") and the plight of the poor farmers and miners ("Ballad of Hollis Brown" and "North Country Blues," respectively). The balance of the album contained love songs, or rather, end-of-love songs that were drawn from his failing relationship with Rotolo. This album went on to cement the idea that Dylan was the "voice of his generation," but unlike before, he had gathered influence over a larger audience.

His new found fame was distressing to him. He wrote in a letter to Broadside Magazine in January of 1964 (found on the "Book of Bob" website),

"I am now famous  
I am now famous by the rules of the public famiousity  
it snuck up on me  
an' pulverized me. . .  
I never knew what was happenin'  
it is hard for me t' walk down the same streets i did before.."  
(Internet 4)

Dylan goes on to say that he does not understand fame and that he is living in a contradiction. He knew people saw him as having all the answers. To this he replies, "An' what am I anyway? Some kind of messiah walkin' around? Hell no I'm not." He feels guilty for making money, guilty that he does not give it all away. He tells of his fears and tries to be honest with the readers. "t' qoute mr froyd/I get quite paranoyd." He advises his fans to stand up for what they believe in by saying, "that might be the most important thing in the whole wide

world. . . /not going against your conscience/ not your own natural senses/ for I think that is all the truth there is. . . an' no more (Internet 4)."

July of 1964 brought another Newport Folk Festival. Here, Dylan displayed his new love songs which were more personal in nature than any of his previous work. Newport showed a glimpse of what was to come from Dylan. In August, he released *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. This album was almost entirely made up of deeply personal and imaginative songs and contained no outright "finger pointing" songs. His break up with Rotolo was chronicled in his many bittersweet ballads. This album allowed Dylan to take the next step in his musical evolution. After leaving blatant protest behind and delving into the personal regions of the mind, he had found the freedom to create a new form of music with his next album.

Another influence on Dylan's writing at this time was his use of drugs. As early as the spring of 1964, Dylan had begun using LSD and often wrote under its influence. "The hallucinatory property of acid opened up whole new areas of poetry to him (Spitz 1989)." He discovered the abstract side of poetry and found a means of depicting this colorful imagery through his drug use. Many of his songs during this period were deemed to be "drug songs." Most notably, "Mr. Tambourine Man" was alleged to be about a drug dealer who would supply him with acid to take him on a "trip upon his magic swirling ship." In "Subterranean Homesick Blues," the medicine which Johnny is mixing in the basement is believed by some to be LSD. This could explain why the lyrics in his songs from his *Bringing It All Back Home* era are seemingly disjointed; they may be an array of drug-induced images plucked from his new state of semi-consciousness.

After hearing the electrified sounds of the Beatles, Dylan was encouraged by their success to try his hand at electric instrumentation. During 1964, the Beatles were dominating both the British and U. S. charts with their brand of electrified, catchy pop music. Dylan was intrigued by this phenomenon. Judging by the work which followed, he was obviously influenced by their

musical style. In return, the Beatles were affected by Dylan's lyrical poetry and sought to incorporate his style into their previously sophomoric attempts at song writing.

It was a bold move for a folk singer to take up an electric guitar and therefore, his fellow folk singers reacted to actions with scorn. As an explanation for this reaction, Peter Yarrow offers, "Folk singers had become icons, who were trusted to think through what they were caring about and sing it with authenticity. It was true that people adored Elvis Presley; they never wanted to know what his opinion was. This particular transformation in the perception of the place of music ultimately was transformational to rock and roll as well (Rock and Roll 1996)." Folk musicians could not condone a singer who would deface their art form by adding electric backing. They could not believe that this kind of music had any relevancy in the world of folk music.

Upon his shift to electric music, Dylan had once again created a new persona for himself. He had already transformed from a shy, small-town Jewish boy to a hard-traveling Woody Guthrie look-a-like. His new status as a rock and roll idol befitted a new image. He had abandoned all the trappings of the folk musician and before long, "He'd transformed himself into the hip philosopher — a fast talking, hard loving, rock' n rolling, trendsetting visionary, able to deflate hypocrisy with his penetrating insight. He was the epitome of cool. James Dean with a guitar (Spitz 1989)."

Dylan was doing what no other artist had endeavored to do. He was uniting his complex lyrics with a rock and roll beat. This union of musical styles resulted in the recording of *Bringing It All Home* (released in March of 1965). Folk purists claimed Dylan had abandoned protest and was "selling out" by making electric music. Allen Ginsberg, renowned Beat poet and long-time Dylan friend, defended his position by stating, "There was still perhaps some hang up of the notion that art had to be at the service of the people. . .rather than an individual

expression which mirrors people's consciousness, but is the expression of a unique personal consciousness (Rock and Roll 1996)."

They could not get beyond the sound of his new music to let themselves listen to his message. Arlo Guthrie, son of Woody Guthrie, commented in the documentary, The History of Rock and Roll, that, "There wasn't a controversy over acoustic versus electric. There was controversy about making music that had the integrity. It seemed inconceivable that somebody could also have as much integrity and be playing rock and roll (Time-Life, 1995)." Underneath those wailing guitars and thumping drums was the same man who pointed out the evils of modern society for us. This new music brought together the tradition of folk protest music with the energy of rock and roll.

In his book Guerrilla Minstrels, Wayne Hampton writes, "It is hard to exaggerate the profound significance of *Bringing It All Back Home*. It is truly a countercultural classic, bridging the gap between the politics of class conflict and the ideological struggle for the cause of the poor and the economically oppressed, and the generational conflict and the anarchistic cult of youth (1986)." Most critics, however, did not see this as a bridging of the gap, but as an abandonment of folk protest. In interviews of this time, Dylan was repeatedly asked why he changed his style and what his views were on protest music.

In the Sheffield University Paper in May of 1965, Jenny de Young and Peter Roche wrote of his recent musical shift in their interview with Dylan as follows:

"Q: Your songs have changed a lot over the last couple of years. Are you consciously trying to change your style, or would you say that this was a natural development?

A: Oh, it's a natural one. The big difference is that the songs I was writing last year, songs like "Ballad in Plain D," they were what I call one-dimensional songs, but my new songs I'm trying to make more three dimensional, you know, there's more symbolism, they're written on more than one level.

Q: How do you feel about being labeled as the voice of your generation?

A: Well, I don't know. I mean, I'm 24, how can I speak for people of 17 or 18? I can't be anyone else's voice. If they can associate with me, that's O.K., but I can't give a voice to people who have no voice.

Would you say that I was your voice?

Q: Well, you manage to say a lot of things that I'd like to say, only I don't have the words.

A: Yeah, but that's not the same as being your voice.

Q: No, but it's something."

(Internet 5)

About his interest in the folk protest genre Dylan stated, "I looked around and saw all these people pointing fingers at the bomb. But the bomb is getting boring, because what's wrong goes much deeper than the bomb. What's wrong is how few people are free. Most people walking around are tied down to something that doesn't let them really speak, so they just add their confusion to the mess. I mean, they have some kind of vested interest in the way things are now. Me, I'm cool (Rodnitzky 1976)." In this sense, Dylan means he is free. Free to live his life as he pleased, free to write about anything he wished and free to use whatever musical style he wanted to try.

Critics had soon deemed his new music "folk rock" as it fused together the ideals and societal lyrics involved with folk protest and the electrified instruments of rock and roll. Dylan also had trouble coming to terms with creating a new musical genre. "As far as folk and folk-rock are concerned, it doesn't matter what kind of nasty names people invent for the music. . . I don't think that such a word as folk-rock has anything to do with it. And folk music is a word I can't use. Folk music is a bunch of fat people. I have to think of it as traditional music (Internet 6)."

As the lyrics of his new songs express, Dylan was becoming cynical and distrustful of everything around him. His fame and fortune had left him completely off balance and his loss of a meaningful love relationship left him



with nothing to believe in. He began to take on a new stance, a more developed persona from the hip rock and roller. Instead of caring deeply enough about issues to write songs about them, he pretended not to care about anything. He sought to prove that society was absurd; that the world had gone mad and there was nothing we could do about it.

“Q: Do you believe in anything?

A: I don’t see anything to believe in, no. I just don’t believe in anything. I don’t see anything to believe in.

Q: Aren’t you a bit cynical?

A: No, I’m not cynical. I don’t, I can’t see anything anybody’s offering me to believe in that I’m going to believe and put all my trust and faith in and everything. Nothing is sacred, man.”

(Don’t Look Back 1967)

He soon began to turn the tables on the disapproving folkies by telling them, “The stuff you’re writing is bullshit, because politics is bullshit. It’s all unreal. The only thing that’s real is inside you. Your feelings. Just look at the world you’re writing about and you’ll see you’re wasting your time. The world is, well. . .it’s just absurd (said on May 1964 to folk singer Phil Ochs as documented by Anthony Scaduto, 1976).”

All of these attitudes are included in three of his songs from the watershed album *Bringing It All Back Home*. Paul Rodnitzky said of the album, “The new songs were filled with bold impressionist images and mystical themes. They could be interpreted in hundreds of ways and indeed they still are. The album was clearly the product of Dylan’s split with old friends, his drug experiences, and the general jolt of his becoming a superstar. Dylan moved into his private mixed-up world and as always the songs faithfully reflected his state (1976).”

“The songs he writes and sings. . .are full of dark, and many insist, important meanings; they are peopled with freaks, clowns, tramps, artists, and mad scientists, dancing to the massive beat of rock and roll (Internet 7).” I will contribute to the endless list of Dylan interpreters to determine the inspiration

for these songs and show that he was influenced by the cultural events of the time. "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Maggie's Farm" and "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," tackled issues such as distrust of authority figures, paranoia, repressed individualism, as well as concern for a society as a whole. Each one of these were themes that ran through Dylan's life at the time of the writing.

### **"Subterranean Homesick Blues"**

Johnny's in the basement, mixing up the medicine  
I'm on the pavement, thinking about the government  
The man in the trench coat, badge out, laid off  
Says he's got a bad cough, wants to get it paid off  
Look out, kid, it's something you did  
God knows when, but you're doing it again  
You better duck down the alleyway, looking for a new friend  
The man in the coonskin cap in the big pen  
Wants eleven dollar bills, but you only got ten.

Maggie comes, fleet foot, face full of black soot  
Talkin' that the Heat put plants in the bed, but  
The phone's tapped anyway, Maggie says that many say  
Must bust in early may, orders from the D. A.  
Look out, kid, don't matter what you did  
Walk on your tip toes, don't tie no bows  
Better stay away from those who carry around a fire hose  
Keep a clean nose, watch the plain clothes  
You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.

Get sick, get well, hang around an inkwell  
Hang bell, hard to tell if anything is gonna sell  
Try hard, get barred, get back, write Braille  
Get jailed, jump bail, join the army if you fail  
Look out, kid, you're gonna get hit  
By users, cheaters, six-time losers, hang around the theaters  
Girl by the whirlpool, lookin' for a new fool  
Don't follow leaders and watch the parking meters.

Get born, keep warm, short pant, romance  
Get dressed, get blessed, try to be a success

Please her, please him, buy gifts, don't steal, don't lift  
Twenty years of schoolin' and they put you on the day shift  
Look out, kid, they keep it all hid  
Better jump down a manhole, light yourself a candle  
Don't wear sandals, try to avoid the scandals  
Don't wanna be a bum, you better chew gum  
The pump don't work 'cause the vandals took the handles.  
(Internet 8)

Don't Look Back, a concert film of Dylan's 1965 English tour, opens to the strains of "Subterranean Homesick Blues" with Dylan holding a stack of cue cards. On the cards were written randomly chosen lyrics that would sound strange when taken out of context. The cards were flashed by Dylan as they were heard while the song played. It was almost as if Dylan was parodying himself. A card shouted, "Look out!" at the beginning of the second stanza as a warning to the "kid." This was followed by slogans such as, "Watch it!" and "Here they come!" Then we were shown, "leaders???" "Dig yourself," and finally, "WHAT?? (1967)."

The song itself is a parody about the absurdity of life in American society. Wayne Hampton writes, "Subterranean Homesick Blues" sets the tone of the album and reflects the anarchistic-existentialist attitudes that were infecting the popular culture of the West. Distrust of established authorities and collective disillusionment with the logic and uniformity of life in an age of machinery ring out clearly. In short, biting spurts of paranoid-absurdist lyrics, Dylan expresses powerfully the condition of youth in an age of insanity (1986)."

The song begins with a scene where the narrator is sitting on the pavement while Johnny is "mixing up the medicine." This scene has several interpretations. Self proclaimed "Dylanologist" A. J. Weberman outlandishly professes that "The reference here seems to be to the clandestine extraction of codeine from cough syrup (Internet 9)." Most interpreters, however take a more fitting approach to the lyric.

Betsy Bowden writes, "The opening scene has political implications. 'Mixing up the medicine' could also suggest a dope pusher or mad doctor in the basement, but the immediate 'government' makes Johnny also a mixer of homemade bombs, the remedy for all the ills of the state (1982)." In this context, it is easy to understand why the kid has to watch out for the "man in the trench coat." His "badge out" implies that he, at best, symbolizes the police force, and at worst, symbolizes organized crime. He is involved in bribery according to Weberman, "the Fed wants a payoff which you cannot afford (Internet 9)."

The next lines, which are repeated with minor changes throughout the remainder of the verses, are warnings to the kid given by the benevolent narrator. The "kid" symbolizes the younger generation. "The freaks and geeks. . . — they represent the puzzling people of the Counterculture. Colourful, radical figures who do not accept the values of bourgeois life — they symbolize freedom (Thomson 1990)." They are constantly being watched and kept in submission by Dylan's evil "they." "Dylan's 'they' represents a monster with at least two heads: corporate management and the bureaucratic establishment, sometimes merged into the Establishment in general. . . 'They' are devious, conspiring people. 'They' are not us (Forland 1992)." The "kid" is rebelling against authority and has to hide from them to keep his individualism and avoid being trapped in the Establishment scheme.

He hides down an alley, only to find a man looking for more than what he can give him. If this song were to be interpreted as the singer-as-narrator, Dylan identifies with the "kid" in this respect. Dylan often felt others wanted more from him than he was able to give; whether it was money, a political endorsement, his time, or his music. This reality of his public life fed his developing feelings of alienation and paranoia which he instills into the "kid" of the song.

The second stanza shows Maggie who is telling us that the "Heat" has tapped their phones and plans to bust them. "The bust is uncertain, their

motivation unclear—are they after dope, crime, politics? . . . Now the narrator's advice changes. Ducking down an alleyway didn't work, so the narrator advises 'you' to stick around the pavement but to make yourself inconspicuous so that 'they' can't tell how strong you really are (Bowden 1982)."

Weberman insists Dylan is alluding to the civil rights movement in this stanza. Maggie's "face full of black soot" symbolizes to him the black population. "Blacks are singled out as criminal suspects simply because they are black. Dylan is advising blacks to keep an eye out for the police 'cause the wind is blowing against blacks in America (Internet 9)."

In the second half of the stanza, Dylan/the narrator is warning the "kid" not to trust authority figures. "Watch the plainclothes," the plainclothes meaning undercover police men (the "man in the trench coat" and the "man in the coonskin cap"), because they are trying to bring you down and infringe on your rights. He tells the "kid" to trust himself and his instincts and not to rely on the opinions of others by saying, "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."

The third stanza involves advice for a normal upbringing. "These commands take the "kid" only a bit past adolescence in a working class life—through the 'ink well' and 'bell' of school, through trying hard at one job and then another, to the equally grim alternatives of jail and the army. . . . Followed by a five-line ghetto scene. . . shows what happens to users and fools. This five-line clash of cheaters, con artists, gamblers, and prostitutes suggests an alternative to the pavement world of the government—but one that evades laws and restrictions instead of setting out to destroy the authorities who decree those laws (Bowden 1982)." This suggests that if one doesn't join the silent majority of the Establishment, one will turn out like these characters. They are underground people, hence the title, "Subterranean Homesick Blues," who symbolize the flip side of the traditional moral values of American culture. Frequently during this

time in history, young people were drawn to an underground life to escape the pressures of a world whose purpose did not make sense to them.

The most important part of this stanza is the line, "Don't follow leaders." This phrase "is another basic antiauthoritarian tenet (Shelton 1986)." This can also translate into the singer-as-narrator interpretation. Dylan could be telling us not to follow him. By this time in his career, he was growing increasingly apprehensive at his position as the moral leader for the youth culture. He did not want to take responsibility for the actions of his fans and is urging them in this line to think for themselves. He further revealed his thoughts on personal responsibility in Playboy Magazine (retrieved from a Dylan website):

Dylan: Now, I hate to come on like a weakling or a coward, and I realize it might seem kind of irreligious, but I'm really not the right person to tramp around the country saving souls. I wouldn't run over anybody that was laying in the street, and I certainly wouldn't become a hangman. I wouldn't think twice about giving a starving man a cigarette. But I'm not a shepherd. And I'm not about to save anybody from fate, which I know nothing about. . . They key word is 'destiny.' I can't save them from that.

Playboy: Still, thousands of young people look up to you as a kind of a folk hero. Do you feel some sense of responsibility toward them?

Dylan: I don't feel I have any responsibility, no. Whoever it is that listens to my songs owes *me* nothing. How could I possibly have any responsibility to any kind of thousands? What could possibly make me think that I owe anybody anything who just happens to be there. I've never written any song that begins with the words, 'I've gathered you here tonight. . .' I'm not about to tell anybody to be a good boy or a good girl and they'll go to heaven. I really don't know what the people who are on the receiving end of these songs think of me anyway. It's horrible. I'll bet Tony Bennet doesn't have to go through this kind of thing. I wonder what Billy the Kid would have answered to such a question.

(Internet 2)

The final stanza retreats back to visions of everyday life. "Images suggest a law-abiding, middle-class upbringing with your own pediatrician, dancing lessons, birthday parties, church, and of course twenty years of schooling. This set of privileges – which to a ghetto kid might seem to promise a better life than army or jail – leads not to the sarcastically said *suck-cess* but to the entrapment of the day shift (Bowden 1982)." This verse echoes the feeling of the college students of the time. They were following the rules and trying to find their place in the world. However, the world they will inherit is not the one full of promise as in their parents' generation. Their only reward for pleasing everyone else but themselves is to end up "working on the day shift." Dylan is telling them to rebel from the conformity of society and find their own path, whether it be above ground or down in a manhole.

The final line of this song, "the pump don't work 'cause the vandals took the handles," has stumped many a Dylan interpreter. I prefer the viewpoint taken by Betsy Bowden. She writes, "In rhymes as well as structure and instrumentation, this final image suggests not despair at a ruined pump but instead a simple, practical way to prevent it from pumping out any more monotonous bursts, monotonous lines, monotonous lives. Well-meant parental advice is just as sinister as are trench-coated figures who demand payoffs and tap phones. All must be rejected. And the vandals are us (1982)." In effect, Dylan is ending his reign as the "voice of his generation" as he tells us that he will no longer offer any advice on how to live life and that his fans will have to find the answers for themselves.

"Subterranean Homesick Blues" captures youthful alienation, paranoia, the violation of individual rights, and the absurdity of everyday American life. "A listener experiences threats to her money, health, dope, and freedom and then two entire childhoods and adolescences climaxed by a dive back underground. The song is a two minute dash from basement to manhole (Bowden 1982)."

Although the message is veiled in imagery, this song remains one of Dylan's best examples of his brand of protest music. "'Subterranean Homesick Blues' expresses the young American's frenetic disillusionment with his society very vividly. Every line hammers in the hysteria (Thomson 1990)."

### **"Maggie's Farm"**

I ain't gonna work on Maggie's Farm no more.  
I ain't gonna work on Maggie's Farm no more.  
I wake up in the morning, fold my hands and pray for rain.  
I got a head full of ideas that are driving me insane.  
It's a shame the way she makes me scrub the floor.  
I ain't gonna work on Maggie's Farm no more.

I ain't gonna work for Maggie's Brother no more.  
I ain't gonna work for Maggie's Brother no more.  
He hands you a nickel, he hands you a dime.  
He asks you with a grin if you're having a good time.  
And he fines you every time you slam the door.  
I ain't gonna work for Maggie's Brother no more.

I ain't gonna work for Maggie's Pa no more.  
I ain't gonna work for Maggie's Pa no more.  
He puts his cigar out in your face just for kicks.  
His bedroom window, it is made out of bricks.  
The National Guard stands around his door.  
I ain't gonna work for Maggie's Pa no more.

I ain't gonna work for Maggie's Ma no more.  
I ain't gonna work for Maggie's Ma no more.  
She talks to all the servants about Man and God and Law.  
Everybody says she's the brains behind Pa.  
She's sixty-eight, but she says she fifty-four.  
I ain't gonna work for Maggie's Ma no more.

I ain't gonna work on Maggie's Farm no more.  
I ain't gonna work on Maggie's Farm no more.  
I try so hard to be just like I am,  
But everybody wants you to be just like them.  
They say, "Sing while you slave," but I just get bored.  
I ain't gonna work on Maggie's Farm no more.



(Internet 10)

"Maggie's Farm" is the third song on *Bringing It All Back Home*. On the surface it seems as if it is a simple song about a discontented worker and the trials of his employment. However, it can also be seen on many different levels and interpreted in various ways.

This song can be seen as Dylan's form of protest against any big business. Big business was on the rise in the early 1960s due to Johnson's expansionist policies of his "Great Society." One of the pitfalls of a growing capitalistic system is that the workers often begin to fall through the cracks and are regarded as numbers, to exist simply as cogs in the corporate wheel. This also brings the interpretation of the song denouncing the authority figures that run these big businesses.

In his Internet website, A. J. Weberman interprets the song by matching up a theme with each verse. Of the first verse concerning the workers who is praying for rain, Weberman perceives the thoughts of the worker as being, "After I realize what it is all about, I give up and want a war (Internet 9)." He feels that, "The worker has been brainwashed." (Also note in Weberman's "Dylan to English" dictionary, "rain" equals heroin, which means this song contains drug references.) In the second stanza, the brother who "hands you a nickel" represents the unions. The third verse featuring Pa symbolizes "the Bosses." Finally, the fourth verse symbolizes the absurdity of organized religion due to the behavior of Ma who "talks to all the servants about Man and God and Law."

Andrew Muir writes a more in-depth reaction to "Maggie's Farm" in his own website. He cites Dylan's performance at Silas Magee's farm in Greensboro, Mississippi as a possible inspiration for the song (Internet 11). According to Wayne Hampton in his book, Guerrilla Minstrels, Dylan performed at a voter registration drive on July 6, 1963. As discussed earlier in this paper, the drive

was organized by SNCC and featured other folk singers including Pete Seeger (1986).

Footage of the performance documented by the concert film, Don't Look Back, shows a young Bob Dylan outfitted in true Woody Guthrie style. His short cropped hair, work shirt and denim jeans was a far cry from the Dylan of 1965, by now sporting a "Jewish 'fro" and wearing mod clothing. At the drive he sang "Only a Pawn in Their Game," a song which investigated the motivation behind the actions of the assassin of civil rights leader Medgar Evers. Given this reference for inspiration, "Maggie's Farm" could be viewed as an extension of his support for the civil rights movement.

Muir sees the song as a "cry for the freedom of the individual," not limiting himself to a black and white racial division in his interpretation. He reiterates the idea of the song being a simple one by examining the structure of the melody as well as the message behind it. The "I" in the narrative represents any number of farm workers, slaves and servants. He sees the first verse as meaning just what it says, that a servant is working in the fields and though he has ideas in his head, he cannot express them since he is bound by menial tasks.

The second verse depicts a brother who sees money as power and lords this power over his servants. He will demean them via charity and pay them in petty cash by handing them nickels and dimes in return for their hard work. He wears a mischievous grin to show how much he enjoys holding them down by exercising his power in this way. He keeps them in line when he "Fines you every time you slam the door."

The third verse takes on a more serious tone while describing "Pa." He smokes a cigar, which he puts out in the servant's face "just for kicks" simply because he can. The cigar itself becomes a symbol of wealth and power. Dylan could have easily substituted a cigarette for the cigar, but that would have been too common for a man such as Pa. Pa symbolizes the brother grown up and shows what can happen if such power develops without anything to prevent it.

The fourth verse could take on several different tones while being interpreted in this manner. It can be seen as the continual building of verses where each character is more evil than the first. In this vein, Ma becomes the evil mastermind behind Pa who directs everything on the farm. On the other hand, Ma can be seen as a comical character; old and vain ("she's sixty-eight, but she says she's fifty-four"), with delusions of being a philosopher when she is in reality only "babbling nonsense." (Internet 11)

The final verse which includes the line, "They say, 'Sing while you slave,' but I just get bored," is literally true for the slaves for their work in the fields, yet remains metaphorically true for Dylan. In his long years of being on the road, he has become weary of touring and singing the same songs night after night. With this interpretation, the song is turned around to tell us something about the author who uses these metaphors to describe his feelings about his own life.

Muir writes about "Maggie's Farm," "Her farm may be taken as a metaphor for all manner of things: the Establishment, white-dominated society, the US of A. Ultimately, though, I see it as representing restricting, corrupt society of system. Society can turn in to a Maggie's Farm—one that entraps and torments the individual spirit of humankind (Internet 11)." Muir is speaking of the cry for the individual which Dylan is sounding. "I try my best to be just like I am/But everybody wants you to be just like them." "Maggie's Farm" becomes the "musical bridge between folk and rock. . .a lyrical bridge between the concerns for the farms from the "Times They Are A-Changing" period to the intensely personal psychological investigations of the personal prisons that we all create by denying the freedom of the individual (Internet 11)."

Catherine Yronwode, from the same website, concludes that "Dylan was proclaiming that he would not write political songs anymore. He would not work on Magee's Farm no more." She is referring again to the time in his career when he was involved with the civil rights movement and performed at the voter registration drive. In her interpretation, the slavery symbolism is reversed.

Dylan's oppressors were no longer the evil white slave masters, but the "lefty folk-niks because they wanted all of his songs to be proletarian positive work songs." What Dylan is saying is that he "has a head full of ideas" and the folkies want him to "scrub the floor" and work for their causes. In breaking away from folk music and into his own style, he must confront their open hostility, which brings us again to the line, "I try my best to be just like I am/But everybody wants you to be just like them." In effect, Dylan is using this song to renounce his involvement in the civil rights movement and to explain his loss of interest in acoustic folk music. (Internet 11)

This point is reiterated in Guerrilla Minstrels, where the author states , "The theme of rejecting authority is further developed in 'Maggie's Farm,' which is a metaphor for the establishment generally, but specifically the Old Left topical-protest establishment that had attempted to package Dylan in its own image. Although Dylan tried his best to 'be just like I am,' everyone had wanted him to 'be just like them.' But this only bored him, so now he vows, 'I ain't gonna work on Maggie's Farm no more (Hampton 1986)."

This interpretation is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that "Maggie's Farm" was the first song Dylan played during his infamous performance at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965. Accompanied by the Butterfield Blues Band with Mike Bloomfield on electric lead guitar and Al Kooper on the organ, Dylan shocked the festival's audience by launching into a fully electrified rendition of this song. His decision to play amplified music with a backing band horrified the folk purists who believed that folk music was meant to be played only on acoustic instruments. By applying these individualistic lyrics to his electric performance that night, Dylan was showing us his intent to break from the folk scene and try playing what he wanted to play. (Spitz 1989)

I tend to take the position that Dylan is including all of these unique perspectives and dealing with the issues on many different levels. As Robert Shelton writes, "This 'anti-work' song contains a strong condemnation of all

meaningless labor. Dylan sounds a declaration of independence against conformity. We may all laugh at the plight of the narrator, until we realize that we're all working on somebody's farm (1986)." I feel he is fighting against authority figures in general who try to keep you down and won't allow you to become yourself. Personal freedom was a major issue for the youth culture of the period and particularly for Dylan. He felt strongly about protecting his individualism and freedom and urges us to find that within ourselves without relying on others to show us the way. In an interview on October 20, 1961, he said, "I won't join a group. Groups are too easy to be in. I've always learned the hard way. I will now, too. When you fail in a group you can blame each other. When you fail alone, you yourself fail (Internet 3)."

Dylan was very much alone at this stage in his life. He was suddenly more famous than he ever imagined; second only to the Beatles. Along with fame and fortune, however, came jealousy and fear. Under the influence of his manager, Albert Grossman, Dylan began to retreat to Grossman's country home in Woodstock, New York. He began to pull away from the friends he had made while in New York City. He became paranoid about anyone who would come around him, assuming they would eventually want something from him. He began to distrust the same people who had been his close friends only a year before. This distrust spread to all people, but most strongly to authority figures, which is evident throughout "Maggie's Farm" as well as the other songs discussed in this paper. At this time in his life, Dylan felt as if he alone were fighting against the world. Everyone was trying to control his career and his life. Each person had a distinct idea of who they thought Bob Dylan should be. He resented this treatment and responded that he should be allowed to be who he wants to be and that he would not conform to "work on Maggie's Farm" any more.

**"It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)"**

Darkness at the break of noon, shadows even the silver spoon  
The hand-made blade, the child's balloon, eclipses both the sun and moon  
To understand, you know too soon, there is no sense in trying  
Pointed threats, they bluff with scorn, suicide remarks are torn  
From the fool's gold mouthpiece, the hollow horn  
Plays wasted words, proves to warn that he not busy being born is busy dying  
Temptation's page flies out the door, you follow, find yourself at war  
Watch waterfalls of pity roar, you feel to moan, but unlike before  
You discover that you'd just be one more person crying  
So don't fear, if you hear a foreign sound to your ear  
It's alright, Ma; I'm only sighing

As some warn victory, some downfall, private reasons great or small  
Can be seen in the eyes of those that call  
To make all that should be killed to crawl  
While others say, "Don't hate nothing at all except hatred"  
Disillusioned words like bullets bark as human gods aim for their mark  
Make everything from toy guns that spark  
To flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark  
It's easy to see without looking too hard, that not much is really sacred  
While preachers preach of evil fates, teachers teach that knowledge waits  
Will lead to hundred dollar plates, goodness hides behind its gates  
But even the President of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked  
And though the rules of the road have been lodged  
It's only people's games that you have to dodge  
And it's alright, Ma; I can make it

Advertising signs that con you into thinking you're the one  
That can do what's never been done, that you can win what's never been won  
Meantime life goes on all around you  
You lose yourself, you reappear  
You suddenly find that you've got nothing to fear  
Alone you stand with nobody near when a trembling distant voice unclear  
Startles your sleeping ear to hear that somebody thinks they really found you  
A question in your nerves is lit, yet you know there is no answer fit  
To satisfy, ensure you not to quit, to keep it in your mind and not forget  
That it is not he or she or them or it that you belong to  
But though the masters make the rules for the wise men and the fools  
I got nothing, Ma; to live up to

For them that must obey authority that they do not respect in any degree  
Who despise their jobs, their destinies, speak jealously of them that are free  
While some unprincipled baptize to strict party platform ties

Social clubs in drag disguise, outsiders, they freely criticize  
Tell nothing except who to idolize and say, "God bless him"  
While one sings with his tongue on fire, gargles in the rat race choir  
Bent out of shape by society's pliers, cares not to come up any higher  
But rather get you down in the hole that he's in  
But I mean no harm, nor put fault, on anyone who lives in a vault  
But it's alright, Ma; if I can't please him

Old lady judges watch people in pairs, limited in sex, they dare  
To push fake morals, insult and stare, while money doesn't talk, it swears  
Obscenity, who really cares, propaganda, all is phony  
While them that defend what they cannot see with a killer's pride, security  
It blows the mind most bitterly for them that think death's honesty  
Won't fall upon them naturally, life sometimes must get lonely  
My eyes collide head-on with stuffed graveyards, false goals, I scuff  
Kick my legs to crash it off and say.  
"OK, I've had enough, what else can you show me?"  
And if my thought-dreams could be seen  
They'd probably put my head in a guillotine  
But it's alright, Ma; it's life and life only

(Internet 12)

"It's Alright, Ma" is one of Dylan's most comprehensive socially conscious works. It represents the ultimate protest song by demolishing social myths and by depicting feelings of youthful alienation, hopelessness about the future, the trend toward violence and war, disillusionment with life, the hypocrisy of authority figures and the establishment, and the loss of individuality. This song proved to his contemporaries that he had not turned his back on music with meaning. He simply took protest to a higher level. His message took on a grander scale and discussed universal human problems.

Hampton writes, "'It's Alright, Ma' is perhaps the masterpiece of the album and a uniquely poetic achievement for a popular artist. And yet its message is profoundly political, setting new standards for the protest song, politically as well as aesthetically (1986)." Dylan wrote these lyrics with poetic grace, presenting flashes of imagery to create "epic-length extrapolations on the human condition (Spitz 1989)." His message is heavily moralistic, calling for

people to realize the absurdity of the world they are living in. "All fifteen verses of 'It's Alright, Ma' careen along the precipice of Armageddon, plucked from the brink of despair only by the witty refrain, 'But it's alright, Ma. . . (Spitz 1989)."

Dylan realized this song was particularly heavy-handed and often downplayed its significance in performance. During a concert in the Royal Albert Hall of London, England, he introduced this song in typical Dylan deadpan style by saying, "This is called 'It's Alright, Ma, I'm only bleeding,' ho, ho, ho (Don't Look Back 1967). However, his message cannot be ignored.

The first verse of this masterpiece paints a bleak landscape of violence and hopelessness. He tells us how violence is overshadowing all facets of American life by saying, "the hand-made blade. . . eclipses both the sun and moon." These words were written as the war in Vietnam was escalating and just before rioting broke out in New York City and Watts. Dylan was predicting the trend toward violence in society.

Hopelessness becomes apparent in the second line, "To understand, you know too soon, there is no sense in trying." He wants to give up on trying to save the world from itself; it is too large of a task for one person and he feels he no longer could make a difference because he'd only be "one more person crying." He's been told lies throughout his life and, therefore, can find nothing to believe in. "Despite his anger, he accepts lies and malaise as part of life, tempering an outraged snort into sadness. Implicitly, he sees that the flaws of life are beyond good and evil (Shelton 1986)." Life is hollow and has no real meaning according to the rules of society. "To Ma, Dylan (representing youth) tries to explain himself and the dehumanizing and alienating conditions that have forced him and his peers to reject everything. . . Face it, says Dylan, your world has gone crazy, the system is disintegrating. . . There is no point in trying to make sense of anything (Hampton 1986)." By the end of it all, Dylan can do nothing but sigh.



“Ma” in this song represents the older generation, the establishment in general, traditional American values, and authority figures of any kind. The remaining verses of the song deal with the hypocrisy of these forms of authority in varying degrees. The Dylan Companion finds that “These authorities, these people in power in mid-sixties society are wearing masks. The king and queen. . . , clergymen, doctors, professors, and judges — all turn into mysterious, cynical caricatures. No use having any faith in *them*. Brutal, hungry for power and really rather silly — that is how the representatives of State and society are characterized. . . But in the sixties there was also a movement against the so-called Establishment, and that movement is also reflected in Dylan’s lyrics of those years (1986).”

The authority figures captured in the second verse include preachers and teachers that exalt false values, telling you if you follow their rules, you will be rewarded by Heaven or with money. In their quest for monetary gains, they have forgotten what is truly important. Dylan can see that to them “not that much is really sacred.” But he knows that he can make it if he “shuns the false prophets, the evil preachers and teachers. . . who try to sell ‘fake morals’ and materialistic values. . . (Hampton 1986).”

In the third verse, he realized while he was deciding what was real and what was fake, “life goes on all around you.” You may lose yourself while you are trying to figure it all out, but you will eventually find yourself again and you will have to remember “that it is not he or she or them or it that you belong to.” At the time of the writing of this song, Dylan was finding that he was his own person; and the younger generation was finding the same, yet it alienated them from the rest of the “silent majority.” They felt that the “masters” had made up the ridiculous rules in the past and they no longer applied to current society. They were turning against the ways of the past and forging their own path since they felt they had “nothing, Ma; to live up to.” “Intuitively, they seem to have come to a collective understanding of the situation and the only way around it,

which is the only way to survive (Hampton 1986)," is to belong only to yourself and not to the Establishment.

The fourth verse discusses those who have found themselves caught in the "rat race choir" of the system. They have been stuck following society's rules, listening to the falsehoods of those in power, and believing all that was told to them. After finding that their beliefs were based on lies, they no longer respect the system, but cannot find the strength to get out of it. They secretly wish they could be free and are jealous of those who break out from tradition. Instead of admiring that quality they did not possess within themselves, they would "rather get you down in the hole that he's in." In this way, society becomes a cycle. The ones who are caught inside try to discourage others from cutting loose by lying to them and perpetuating the system to make them feel better about the decisions they made in their own lives.

In the final verse, Dylan attacks judges who "push fake morals, insult and stare" at the alienated youth culture. They resent the fact that the youth is rejecting the ways of the past. Yet the youth is beginning to find out it is not going to be simple to throw away all tradition. "The struggle to become free of the grip of 'Ma' . . . can be very hard on the psyche. For in transcending reason, one faces the danger of insanity. Dylan shares his experiences of colliding head-on with graveyards, false gods, and a pettiness so insidious that he feels as though he has 'walked upside down inside hand cuffs' (Hampton 1986)." He finds within himself the strength to go on because he believes in himself and knows what he is doing is right. "He can now kick it off [hand cuffs] with self-assurance, asking, 'What else can you show me?' The message is clear: the times have changed, the world is no longer as rational and orderly as the old would have us believe, and adapting to the changes can be trying (Hampton 1986)."

The last few lines of the song illustrate Dylan's struggle with expressing the emotions and thoughts he held inside. The line, "And if my thought-dreams could be seen, they'd probably put my head in a guillotine," can be traced back

to the lyrics of "Maggie's Farm," where he is struggling "to be just like I am, but everybody wants you to be just like them." He is disillusioned with the way things have come to be in society, but in the end realizes that, "It's alright, Ma; it's life and life only."

As described in the interpretations of the songs above, "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Maggie's Farm" and "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," Dylan's work has closely reflected as well as influenced the culture of the sixties. By tackling tough issues such as alienation, distrust of authority, war, and personal freedom, Dylan has established himself forever in our minds as a talented protest poet who led the battle charge to a better way of life. In the work of Bob Dylan, music and culture have been forever synthesized into a powerful, dynamic force.

He often discounted his significance in the movement toward music becoming a cultural force in the sixties. He knew there was something special going on in that magical decade, yet could not come to terms with having any part in changing the cultural tide. He said to a Time Magazine reporter during his English tour in 1965, "Are you going to see the concert tonight? Are you going to hear it? OK, you hear it and see it and it's gonna happen fast. And you're not going to get it all. And you might even hear the wrong words, you know. And then afterwards—see, I won't be able to talk to you afterwards. I got nothing to *say* about these things I write. I mean, I just write 'em. I don't write 'em for any *reason*. There's no great *message*. I mean, if you want to tell other people that, go ahead and tell 'em, but I'm not going to have to answer to it (Don't Look Back 1967)."

He may not want to answer to it, but his words still stand today as some of the greatest lyrics in the history of rock and roll. We will continue to hear it and see it. We will try to decide for ourselves if there is any reason or message behind it. We will look for those answers, for as far as I am concerned they are still, "blowin' in the wind."

### Works Cited

- Bowden, Betsy, Performed Literature: Words and Music by Bob Dylan, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 1982.
- "Bringing it All Back Home or Another Side of Bob Dylan: Midwestern Isolationist," Forland, Tor Egil, Journal of American Studies, vol.26, pp. 337-355, 1992.
- Cantor, Norman F., The Age of Protest: Dissent and Rebellion in the Twentieth Century, Hawthorne Books, Inc., New York, New York, 1969.
- Dickstein, Morris, Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties, Basic Books, Inc., New York, New York, 1977.
- Don't Look Back, dir. Pennebaker, D. A., Leacock-Pennebaker Associates, Inc. and Ashes and Sand, Inc., 1967.
- Hampton, Wayne, Guerrilla Minstrels, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, TN, 1986.
- The History of Rock and Roll: Volume Four, Time-Life Video and Television, Warner Brothers, 1995.
- Koerselman, Gary H., The Lost Decade: A Story of America in the 1960s, Peter Lang Publisher, New York, New York, 1989.
- Layman, Richard, senior ed., American Decades: 1960-1969, Gale Research Company, 1995.
- Rock and Roll: Episode Three: Shakespeares in the Alley, Bippart, Vicky and McCabe, Daniel, eds., Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1996.
- Rodnitzky, Jerome L. Minstrels of the Dawn: The Folk-Protest Singer as a Cultural Hero, Nelson-Hall, Chicago, IL, 1976.
- Scaduto, Anthony, Bob Dylan, Grosset and Dunlap, New York, New York, 1971.
- Shelton, Robert, No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan, Beech Tree Books, William Morrow and Company, New York, New York, 1986.

Spitz, Bob, Dylan: A Biography, W. W. Norton and Company, New York, New York, 1989.

"The Sixties," Peters, Neal, Rolling Stone, n. 585, pg. 61(7), August 23, 1990.

Thomson, Elizabeth and Gutman, David, eds., The Dylan Companion, Dell Publishing, New York, New York, 1990.

Internet 1: <http://www.fmi-fcia.uchicago.edu/~jrr/tbob/message.html>, "The Book of Bob"

Internet 2: <http://www.interferenza.com/bcs/interw/66-jan.htm>. "Nat Hentoff, Playboy Magazine, 'The Playbody Interview: Bob Dylan,' Feb. 1966."

Internet 3: <http://www.interferenza.com/bcs/interw/61-oct20.htm>, "From the Izzy Young Journals: Izzy Young, October 20, 1961"

Internet 4: <http://www.fmi-fcia.uchicago.edu/~jrr/tbob/letter.html>, "The Book of Bob"

Internet 5: <http://www.interferenza.com/bcs/interw/65-apr30.htm>, "Bob Dylan," Jenny De Young and Peter Roche, Sheffield University Paper, May 1965.

Internet 6: <http://www.interferenza.com/bcs.interw/65-nov08.htm>, "Was it What You Wanted?" Paul J. Robbins, Los Angeles Free Press, Sept 17 and 24, 1965.

Internet 7: <http://www.iam.com/people/jules/dylan.html> "What Have We Here?" Jules Seigel, Saturday Evening Post, 1965.

Internet 8: <http://fmi-fcia.uchicago.edu/~jrr/5subter.html> "Subterranean Homsick Blues" lyrics.

Internet 9: <http://www.dylanology.com>, "Dylanology," A. J. Weberman.

Internet 10: <http://www.fmi-fcia.uchicago.edu/~jrr/5maggie.html>, "Maggie's Farm" lyrics.

Internet 11: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/2667/maggiesf.html>

Internet 12: [http://www.fmi-fcia.uchicago.edu/~jrr/5itis\\_b.html](http://www.fmi-fcia.uchicago.edu/~jrr/5itis_b.html), "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" lyrics.